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The Revolutionary Martyrs of Ancient Pachaug.



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The Revolutionary Martyrs of Ancient Pachaug.

AN HISTORICAL PAPER PREPARED
BY DANIEL L. PHILLIPS, GRISWOLD,
CONN., AND READ BY HIM AT THE
UNVEILING OF A MONUMENT TO THE
MEMORY OF THE REVOLUTIONARY
MARTYRS OF ANCIENT PACHAUG,
MEMORIAL DAY, 1903.

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THE REVOLUTIONARY MARTYRS OF ANCIENT PACHAUG.

Six years ago the knowledge of local history in the town of Griswold was confined largely to traditions, more or less correct, in the minds of a few persons of historical tastes. At that time the Anne Brewster Fanning Chapter, Daughters of the American Revolution, was established. This organization has encouraged and popularized historical investigation, and used its influence to put into permanent form whatever of value has been discovered in our local annals. By its works, it is continually saying to every citizen of Griswold, and with a peculiar emphasis on this Memorial day, "The ground on which you are standing is historic, and in a large sense holy ground."

One discovery of these years is a list of the names of seventeen men, soldiers of the war of the Revolution, from the parish of Ancient Pachaug, North Preston, now the town of Griswold. These men died in the service, and this list is an important addition to the State archives, as well as to local history. These names were found in the records of the parish church kept by the pastor, the Reverend Levi Hart, among the list of deaths for the years 1775-1783, and the manner of this record is as follows:

- | | | | |
|------|-------------------|----|---|
| 1776 | Aug. | 17 | Solomon Coit in ye army. |
| | | 27 | Rouse Bly slain in battle. |
| | Oct. | 23 | Caleb Green in captivity. |
| | Nov. | | Lester Stanton in ye army. |
| | | 24 | Elijah Rose in captivity. |
| 1777 | Febr ^y | 9 | Roger Billings in captivity about this time. |
| 1778 | Aug. | 29 | Joab Burton in ye Continental army about this time. |
| 1779 | July | 4 | Dr. Eben ^r Robison in captivity at New York. |
| 1781 | Jan. | 8 | Jonathan Belcher in captivity at New York. |

1781	Jan.	29	Woodbury Starkweather on his return from captivity.
	July		John Benjamin Jr. slain by the enemy near New York.
	Sept.	6	John Billings Jr. slain by the enemy at Groton Fort.
	Oct.		Benajah Tracy } in captivity at New York.
			George Austin }
	Dec.		Peleg Billings & — Guile in the army.
1782	Feb.		— Bond in ye army.

The following is a brief account of their lineage and their lives :

SOLOMON COIT. The Preston Coits, to which family he belonged, were of much importance in the town and county in which they lived. The founder of this family was Samuel, son of Reverend Joseph Coit of Plainfield, who settled in the northern part of the town of Preston as early as 1738, and became a leading citizen of his adopted town. A veteran of the colonial wars, a colonel in active service of the colony troops, at the opening of the war of the Revolution he was first in rank and influence in this section of the colony. His advanced age, however, 67 years, would not permit active field service, and in 1776 he resigned, and Captain John Tyler, afterwards Brigadier General John Tyler of this parish, was appointed in his place. Twelve sons and grandsons of this old veteran served in the war of the Revolution ; among them his grandson Solomon, the subject of this sketch, son of Samuel Coit, Jr., and his wife Mercy Clark. He was born January 21, 1759, and was, therefore, a boy of sixteen at the beginning of the war. His home was in the neighborhood of what is now the Griswold town farm, near where the Coits first settled. His name is not found on any State rolls or lists. It is only by the entry in the records of his parish already given, that we know this young lad was the first from ancient Pachaug to give his life for his country.

ROUSE BLY. No record of the family or birth of this man has been found. Even the family name seldom appears in any records in Eastern Connecticut. In the Rhode Island records, however, it is frequently seen, and it is probable that Rouse Bly was one of the pioneers of the immigration of

Rhode Islanders to this section. This immigration reached its height during the first half of the nineteenth century, and contributed very largely to the prosperity of Griswold. His military record is as follows: A private from Preston in the Lexington alarm, a private in Captain John Tyler's company, Colonel Parsons' regiment, at the siege of Boston 1775, and a sergeant in Captain Percival's company, Colonel Huntington's regiment, in the campaign around New York in 1776. In this regiment Pachaug was largely represented. He fought in the disastrous battle of Long Island, where he was killed—a kinder fate than awaited many of his companions, who went into captivity.

CALEB GREEN, the oldest son of Winter and Borrodil (Bennet) Green, was born October 28, 1757. His home was the ancestral farm at Spy Rock, a hill about half a mile northeast of Hopeville, and the highest point of land in the vicinity. Nature has faced the east side of this hill with a perpendicular wall of rock many feet in height, and dim traditions of high tragedy enacted here, in the early days, cluster around it. On the top of the hill, almost hidden by a thicket of trees and briars, is a group of graves of a forgotten generation. One monument, the best preserved, bears the name of Winter Green.

Winter Green, the father of Caleb Green, was the son of John Green, whose father William bought land and settled here in 1709. His mother, Borrodil Bennet, was the daughter of William and Elizabeth (Green) Bennet, whose home was near Spy Rock. Caleb Green was enrolled in Colonel Huntington's regiment of continental troops, which served under Washington in the campaign around New York in 1776. His regiment fought in the battle of Long Island, shared in the defeat, and lost heavily in prisoners, who were barbarously penned up by their captors in churches and on shipboard. Among the captives was Caleb Green, who, after two months of torture, died October 23, 1776. He was the first of our martyrs to die in captivity.

LESTER STANTON, the son of Robert and Mary (Lester) Stanton, was born June 25, 1742. The home of his parents, where he is supposed to have spent his early years, was between what is now the John Graves farm and the farm of Kingsley Chapman in the south part of Griswold.

His father was a descendant of Captain John Stanton of Narragansett war fame, who gave one-half his vast estate in the Pachaug country to his son John. According to tradition, he aided the speedy settlement of the country, by disposing of farms to actual settlers on surprising terms—to one, on condition of his being a good neighbor; to another, for the consideration of a plow clevis and pin. He also, it is said, gave a farm to each of his seven sons, of whom Robert Stanton was one. The mother of Lester Stanton was Mary, daughter of Andrew Lester, the first of the name in Pachaug, whose wife was the daughter of John Starkweather and sister of the mother of Robert Stanton.

All the known war record of Lester Stanton is contained in that line in the records of his parish, already quoted, which makes mention of his death. He married August 6, 1772, Margaret Benjamin, the sister of John Benjamin, Jr., his fellow martyr. The graves of his parents and many of the Stanton line are to be found in the Leonard burying ground.

ELIJAH ROSE. In the Geer burial ground, on the farm of Samuel Norman, are to be found many old monuments marked with the name of Rose. At the time of the war of the Revolution, the Rose family was numerous and well-to-do, but the name has not been known in Griswold for many years. About one hundred years ago the old Rose farm was sold to the ancestor of the Geer family, and has descended to Samuel Norman. Thomas Rose, the father of Elijah, married Sarah Harris of Plainfield in 1742. They resided in Norwich, where their children were born and reared. His farm of two hundred acres joined the old Rose farm, and was in that part of Norwich east of the Quinnebaug

river which, in 1786, was set off to the town of Preston. This farm was the site of what is known in our day as Ashland village, in Jewett City. For many years, before this territory belonged to Preston, it was a part of the Second Ecclesiastical Society of that town, and in this way Elijah Rose became a son of ancient Pachaug. He was born July 26, 1757. His father's house must have stood not far above the site of the old Ashland mill. Of his military record, we only know that he belonged to Captain Percival's company of Colonel Huntington's regiment, that he was taken prisoner at the battle of Long Island August 27, 1776, and died after languishing in captivity three months.

JOAB BURTON. The Burtons came from Salem, Massachusetts and were there in witchcraft times. Many families from Salem and the adjoining towns had already fled from the troubled conditions which superstition had engendered, to the quiet of Pachaug when, in 1709, Jacob Burton bought land which is still in possession of his descendants, and settled here. His wife Judith was a constituent member of the Pachaug church, and his son Israel was among the first children baptized after its organization. Israel Burton married Silence Herrick, and Joab Burton, born about 1755, was their son. The home of Israel Burton at the time of his death, and for years before, was the house which stands a little off the road near the Burton school house. A pretty pond lies near it, and a noble pine tree stands sentinel beside it. The house itself has been vacant for many years, and will not stand much longer. In this house, it is supposed, Joab Burton passed some years of his life. His first recorded military service was at the siege of Boston 1775, where he was a private in Colonel Parsons' regiment, in which were so many of his neighbors. In 1777, he enlisted in the First regiment, Connecticut Line. His regiment joined Washington's army in Pennsylvania in September, 1777, fought in the battle of Germantown October 4, endured

the sufferings of Valley Forge 1777-78, and was present at the battle of Monmouth, June 28. His death occurred two months after, and is recorded in the army rolls as well as on the records of his parish.

DR. EBEN^R. ROBINSON. Besides the entry of his death, there is nothing in town or church records or tradition, here, that sheds light on this man's history, but in Plainfield we find some clues. In the records of the old church, in that town, is this entry: "Dr. Eben^r. Robinson, Jr., died at New York, July, 1779, a prisoner." It is so like our own record that it must mean the same man. Other facts, from Plainfield town and probate records, and private sources, furnish circumstantial evidence from which his story is pieced out. He was born, probably, in Plainfield, between 1750 and 1755, the child of Dr. Ebenezer Robinson, a physician and landowner of that town, and Mary Bennet his wife, and when grown, adopted the profession of his father. He naturally came to this parish, for the Bennets and Greens of Spy Rock were his cousins. In June, 1776, he enlisted in Colonel Sage's battalion, Wadsworth's brigade, in a company whose captain was John Dixon of Voluntown, and whose first lieutenant was William Edmond of Preston. This battalion reinforced Washington in New York, served in Long Island, suffered some loss in the retreat from New York September 15, and was in the battle of White Plains, October 28. No other record of him is found until three years later, when he is registered as surgeon's mate on the pay list of the ship *Oliver Cromwell*, a State man of war, which had been in commission since the summer of 1776, and had been most successful in her cruises against the enemy. The period of his service included the last successful cruise of this ship, which, after being out twelve days, returned with four prizes—two of them vessels of ten guns each—with sixty prisoners. He was on this ship in her last fight on June 5th, 1779, when she met the British frigate *Daphne*. After a battle of two hours, her mainmast

shot away and another vessel having come to the assistance of the enemy, she surrendered. Her crew was taken into captivity on board the prison ships *Jersey* and *Good Hope* in New York harbor. In August of that same year, the captain and crew were exchanged. Ebenezer Robinson, however, who had been placed on the *Jersey*, called "The Old Hell," on account of the peculiar horrors undergone by her victims, was unable to endure the hardships of his confinement, and had died a month before the exchange.

JONATHAN BELCHER, the oldest son of Moses and Esther (Rudd) Belcher, was born April 21, 1760. The Belchers date back in our history to 1717, when Moses Belcher of Milton, Mass., bought a large tract of land near what is now Hopeville, and settled there with his two sons, William and Elijah. He was a constituent member of the Pachaug church and one of its first deacons. His descendants were prominent in all the affairs of the community. His son William was ancestor of Captain Wm. Belcher of Revolutionary war fame. His son Elijah, for many years deacon of the Pachaug church, was the grandfather of the subject of this sketch.

Besides the parish record already referred to, little is known about Jonathan Belcher. His father's farm and his early home adjoined that of his grandfather, and must have been near what is now the residence of Dr. Byron Sweet. After the record of his birth in the Preston vital statistics is this entry: "The above named Jonathan Belcher died in New York Jan. 5th, 1781." It is possible that the John Belcher of Preston, who was lieutenant in Nathan Hale's company, in Colonel Webb's regiment, Connecticut Line, 1775, and who re-entered the service in 1776, and whose name is in the list of prisoners on board the *Jersey* prison ship, was this same man, since John was sometimes used as a contraction of Jonathan. Otherwise, there is no record of his service nor of the manner of his captivity.

WOODBURY STARKWEATHER, son of John Starkweather of Stonington and his wife Elizabeth Belcher of Pachaug,

was born in Stonington, February 11, 1757. Through the Starkweathers he was related to Lester Stanton. His mother and the father of Jonathan Belcher were both children of Dea. Elijah Belcher. John Starkweather died some years before the war of the Revolution, and his widow returned to Pachaug with her children. In 1776, Belcher Starkweather, the oldest son, who is still remembered by one of our old citizens, served as a soldier in the campaign around New York. In 1777 he was appointed guardian of his brothers, Woodbury and Amos, and his sister Elizabeth, who were all minors. The same year the names of Woodbury and Amos appear in the rolls of Colonel Latimer's regiment of militia, and their term of service shows that they shared the danger and glory of the battle of Saratoga, and saw the surrender of Burgoyne. In 1778 the name of Corporal Woodbury Starkweather appears on a petition from Colonel McClellan's regiment of militia to the General Assembly for increase of pay, because of the enormous rise in price of the necessaries of life. There is no record of his further service, save the bare fact that he was a prisoner on the Jersey prison ship, and the entry on the records of his parish. He left a widow, Elizabeth, but there is no mention of children. His body probably rests in our soil, but his grave is unmarked and unknown. A monument in the Leonard cemetery to Woodbury Starkweather, son of Belcher Starkweather, shows that his brother and guardian held him in honored and loving remembrance.

JOHN BENJAMIN, JR., son of John Benjamin of Preston and his wife Margaret Jamison of Stonington, was born on Christmas day 1751. His home was the ancestral farm where generations of Benjamins had lived. It now belongs to the farm lately owned by George N. Holmes, just south of the Pachaug store. This farm also includes the birthplace of George D. Prentice, Griswold's greatest genius. The first Benjamin bought land here in 1696. In 1730 it is mentioned, in the records, as near the new meeting-house

in Preston. In 1762 a road was laid out from the south end of the society, commencing at a farm called then and now the "Billings farm," and running northerly to the south door of the meeting-house. The last landmark, next the meeting-house, that indicated the course of this road was the house of John Benjamin. Again in 1770 John Benjamin's farm was the south bound of the Pachaug school district. It went out of the Benjamin name about 1800. John Benjamin, Jr., the soldier, entered the army in 1775 and served with his neighbors at the siege of Boston. His name next appears, in 1778, on the petition of Colonel McClellan's regiment already mentioned. In 1781 he belonged to General Waterbury's brigade of state militia organized for coast defense between New Haven and New York, and was killed near Horseneck June 24th of the same year. On May 11, 1775, he married Lotisa Palmer of Stonington, and several children were born to them.

BENAJAH TRACY was the son of Benajah Tracy of Preston and Hannah Safford of Norwich, and a direct descendant of Lieutenant Thomas Tracy, one of the original settlers of Norwich, through his son Thomas, who was one of the petitioners for the incorporation of Preston in 1686. Nathaniel, the son of the second Thomas, and grandfather of our Benajah, had among his large possessions a farm on Stone Hill, in North Preston, which he willed to his grandson Benajah. It is by this will, and the kindness of Dr. Dwight Tracy of New York City, that we trace his lineage. There is no record of his birth, which probably occurred about 1739 or 40. He was by trade a surveyor and joiner. His first military experience was in the French war, when in 1758 his name appears in the pay roll of Colonel Samuel Coit's company, Second regiment, Connecticut troops, in which were many Pachaug men. In 1774, he deeded the farm, willed him by his grandfather, to Jabez Averill. It remained in possession of the Averills until a few years ago, and is still known as the Averill farm. The

first record of his service in the war of the Revolution is in 1777 with Gates, in the campaign against Burgoyne in the same regiment with Woodbury Starkweather and others of his neighbors. Again in 1779 he was an eight months' man in the Second regiment, Connecticut Line. On July 7th, 1780, he enlisted in the Seventh regiment, Connecticut Line, and was discharged Dec. 3d, of the same year. When he was taken captive, or where he died, is not known. He married, July 1, 1762, Lucy, daughter of Robert Herrick of Preston. Ten children were born to them.

GEORGE AUSTIN. On the south side of the Fifth school district, near Pachaug Plain, lived at the beginning of the war Ben Austin, his wife Susannah, and their eight children, the oldest probably not more than fourteen years of age. Before the close of the war the father and four sons were enrolled in their country's service. The first recorded service of George, the oldest son, is contained in a travel abstract of Captain Benjamin Bacon's company of the Twenty-first militia, commanded by Colonel Douglass of Plainfield late in 1776, when, in response to an earnest call for troops, from Washington, in New York, forced marches, quickened by offers of reward, were made, from the mustering place to the scene of action. In the record, George Austin is credited with having marched two hundred and ninety-five miles. In 1778, he signed the petition already mentioned, of Colonel McClellan's regiment, to which he belonged. There is no further account of him until three years later, when in the records of his parish is found the date and manner of his death.

ROGER BILLINGS, JOHN BILLINGS, JR., and PELEG BILLINGS were descendants of Captain Roger Billings, a notable man in his day, whose home, known in our day as the Clark Saunders place, about a mile south of Glasgo, was the north part of that large Billings tract which in early times extended southerly almost to North Stonington village.

This farm came to him from his father, William Billings of Preston, who was the son of that William Billings who came from England and settled in Stonington at a very early date. Active in civil affairs, Captain Roger Billings filled important offices in his parish and town. In military affairs he was well known. He had been a commissioned officer for thirty years. At least three times, during the Colonial wars, he was a leader of the men of Pachaug in expeditions against Canada. His last military service was in 1775 at the time of the Lexington alarm, when, although sixty-seven years of age, he appeared at the head of his company and marched for the relief of Boston. Of the goodly number of his sons and grandsons who devoted themselves to their country's service, three gave their lives. The first was Roger, his grandson and namesake. Roger Billings was born April 6th, 1759, the child of John Billings and Eunice Gallup of Stonington. The home of his boyhood was near his grandfather's farm. His first service in the war was in 1775 in Captain Mott's company of Colonel Parsons' regiment. This company was ordered to the Northern Department under Schuyler, whose object was to secure possession of Lakes George and Champlain, and to invade Canada, while the rest of the regiment took part in the siege of Boston.

In 1776 he served in Durkee's regiment of Continental troops. About Sept. 1st, he joined a small body of select troops just organized called Knowlton's Rangers, famous fighters, who in an engagement just after the retreat of the American army from New York, so gallantly drove back the enemy that new courage and hope came to the dejected and disheartened Americans. At the urgent entreaty of the commander of Fort Washington, the Rangers were assigned to that post and were surrendered with the rest of the garrison Nov. 16th, 1776. It is said that the prisoners taken at Fort Washington were treated with great cruelty. Roger Billings endured the horrors of his captivity for some months, before death came to his relief.

John Billings, Jr., son of John and brother of Roger, was born Oct. 4th, 1761. His name first appears in the list of names of Colonel McClellan's regiment in 1778, among others of his parish. Nowhere else in lists or rolls is mention made of him until the memorable 6th of September, 1781, the date of the battle of Groton Heights. Then, for the first time during the war, the sound of battle was heard in Pachaug, and the smoke of a burning town, fired by the enemy, was seen from her hills. Misled by the enemy's guns which confused our signals, the men of this parish were too late for the most part to engage in the conflict. A few, however, were there, and among them Roger Billings. The part he took in that day's doings is not known, but in the list of killed his name appears. On the monument erected forty-nine years afterwards "To the memory of the brave patriots who fell in the massacre at Fort Griswold," is the name of John Billings, the only one of all our martyrs whose sacrifice has, hitherto, been publicly recognized.

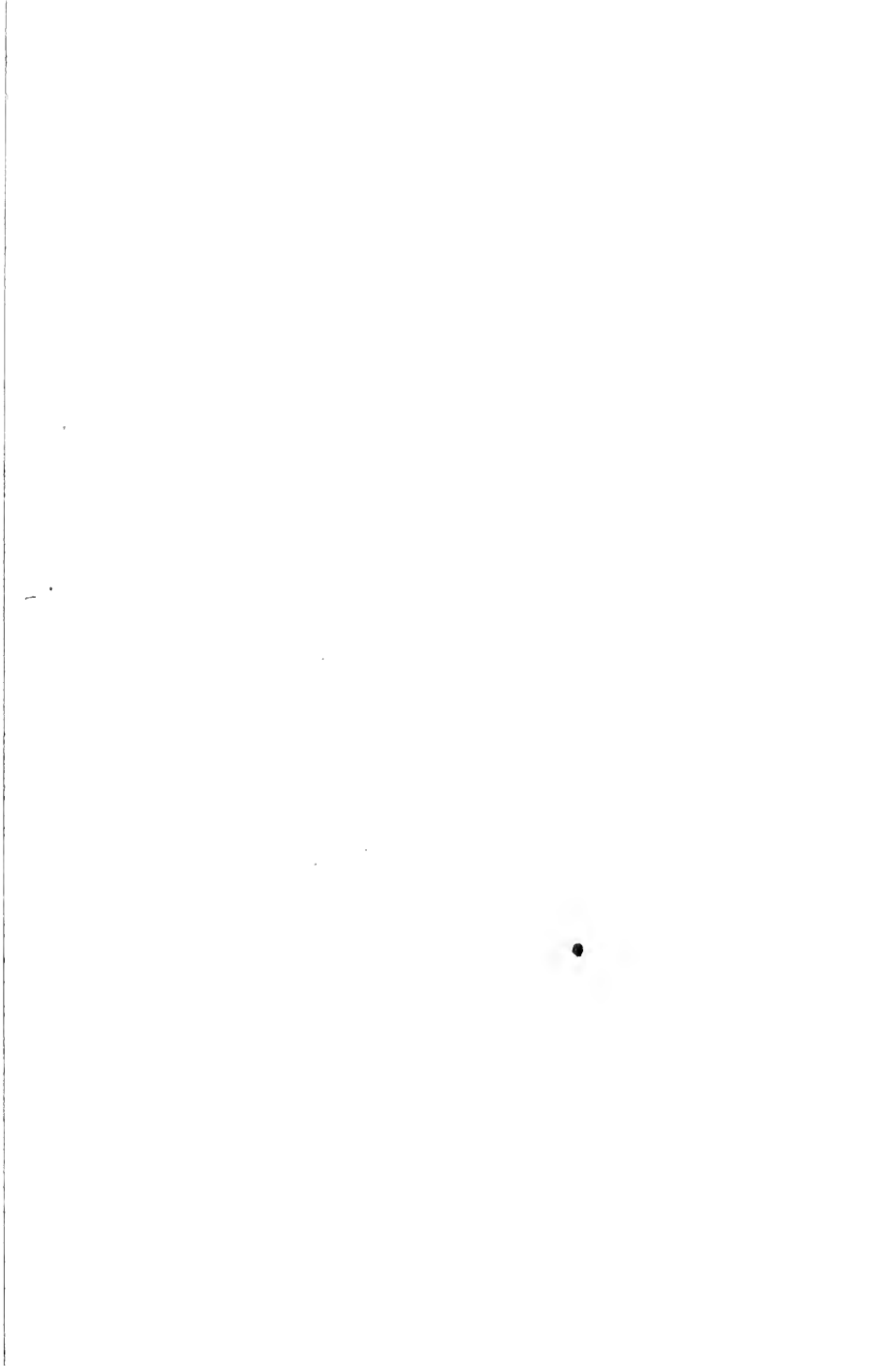
Peleg Billings, son of Captain Roger Billings, was born June 26th, 1738. At the breaking out of the war of the Revolution, he was already a veteran soldier. For, at the age of seventeen, during the French war, he enlisted in his father's company and served a campaign in Canada.

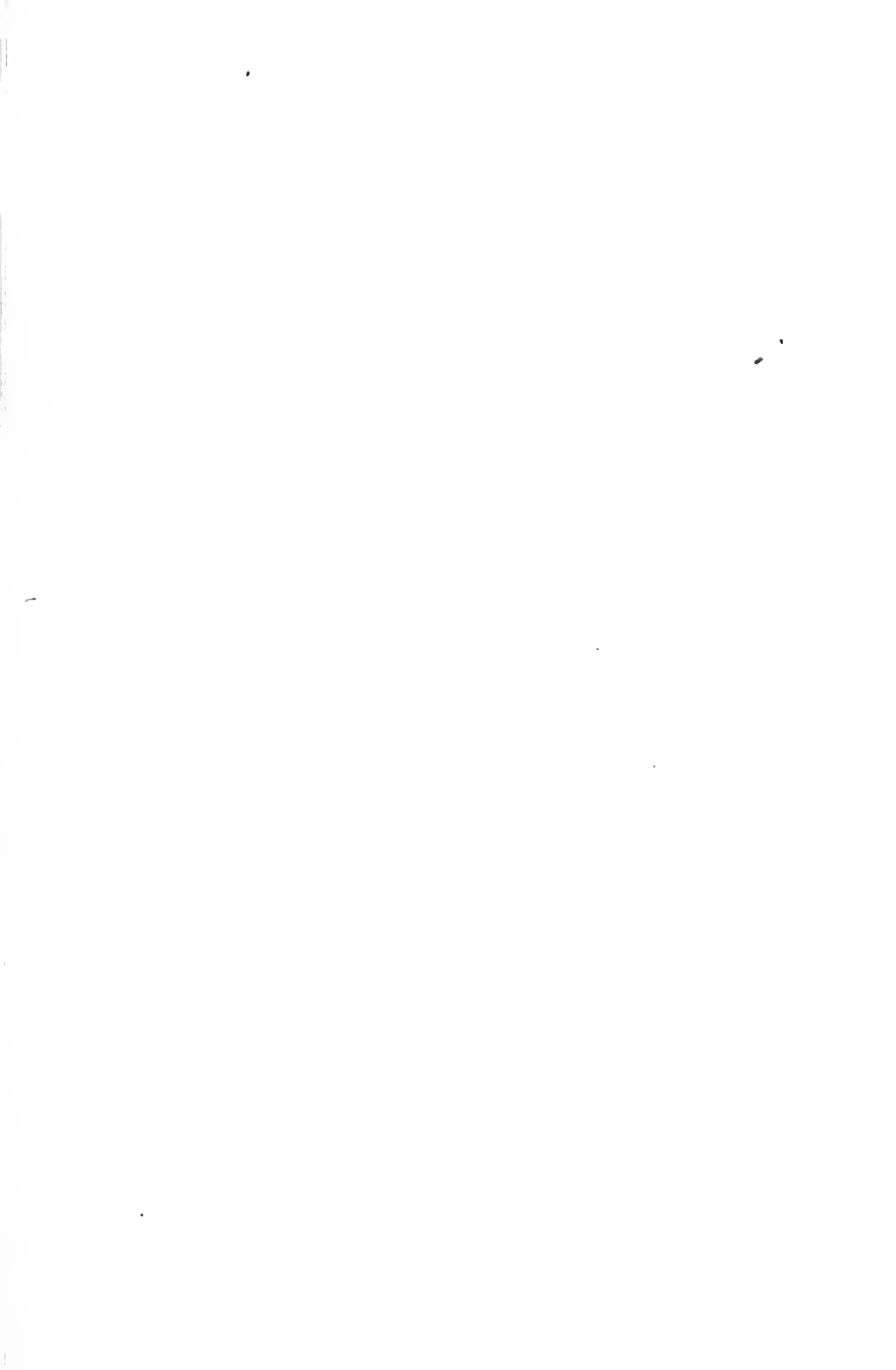
In 1775 he served in the Northern Department under Schuyler in the same company as his nephew Roger. In 1777, with Woodbury Starkweather, Benajah Tracy and others of his neighbors, he fought at Saratoga and saw the surrender of Burgoyne. In 1778 he enlisted in the Third regiment Connecticut Line, and served from March 20th of that year to January 1st, 1779. Of his further service, or the manner of his death, nothing is known save what is already given in the parish records. He married Mary Stanton, probably sister of Lester Stanton. Four children were born to them.

——— GUILLE and ——— BOND were the last to give their lives. Of them nothing is known, save what is already given.

At a town meeting held in Preston, August 27, 1770, Deacon Nathaniel Brown of Pachaug presiding, to consider the difficulties under which this town and all America labors at this time, this high principle was laid down, that "it is the duty of every man who wishes well to his posterity to lend a hand to save his country from ruin." How well the men of Pachaug lived up to this high principle is something to remember. Out of the thousand souls contained in the parish, not far from the present population of Griswold, exclusive of its villages, probably not less than one hundred and fifty men engaged in their country's service. Of these about one hundred have been identified. The remainder are unnamed and unknown.

The missing records, our last two martyrs who are known only by the fragments of their names, bring into high relief the service of the half hundred men from ancient Pachaug whose very names have been forgotten. And we honor, on this occasion, not only these seventeen martyrs, but all who with them, from this ancient parish, devoted themselves to establish and preserve the principles of a free government for the sake of posterity.





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